

# Free-Space Path Loss

Nina Canell is a sculptor whose working vocabulary ranges from concrete materials to mutable substances. She has a distinct penchant for the in-between, for micro-phenomena, for the imperceptible but felt, as well as for conductors, or non-conductors that might forcibly transform into conductors, and for materials that have specific uses, have often been used, are visibly marked by the history of that use and, as such, ultimately form part of a process of which her work is a direct result.

Canell's practice can be loosely located in an art-historical trajectory that begins with Duchamp's quasi-pataphysical interest in the unseen, in-between and transitional as articulated in his theory of the *inframince* (infrathin)<sup>1</sup> and later on, in the 1960s and '70s, continues with process based art, Arte Povera and its preoccupation with industrial and raw materials, and a whole ethos of utopia-addled practitioners who sought to empirically apply scientific and theoretical principles or models to art.<sup>2</sup> However, Canell's work differs from this ethos significantly, not only in terms of her lack of corrective or prescriptive utopianism, or in some cases critical dystopianism, but also by virtue of the radically different period and technological paradigm in which she is operating.

Upon first, very cursory glance, Canell's work is also liable to suggest metaphysical concerns,

but this is largely mistaken, as her processes are thoroughly grounded in empirical phenomena, or, we might say, cause. If I say ‘largely mistaken’ it is because Canell’s work has an appreciably complex relationship with allegory and metaphor (and anything that renders itself vulnerable to allegory can never completely eschew the metaphysical).<sup>3</sup> Like great literature<sup>4</sup>, her work at once actively courts and rejects allegory and metaphor. Generously welcoming the flame of interpretability, it never definitively burns out into single interpretation.

It does this, I would argue, by insistently foregrounding the material and processual qualities of its composition. This happens, most importantly, in the meticulous captions and descriptions that invariably accompany the work.<sup>5</sup> These include material and process as much as any phenomena the work might seek to contain (whenever electricity is used, for instance, the exact level of voltage is always indicated). Nothing is left to chance; the indolent imp of vagueness is never allowed anywhere near Canell’s practice. And this prohibition, in turn, has a distinct way of forestalling any metaphysical and allegorical flights of fancy that might flatten what she does into moral or philosophical servitude or, even worse, platitude.

So what then, if anything, is this work about? If, on one hand, it is marked by a certain irreducibility, which is both material and phenomenological – never being anything other than itself – then, on the other hand, it does indeed traffic in metaphor and, as I already said, tinker, if obliquely (always obliquely), with allegory. Consider, first and foremost, the title of the exhibition itself: *Free-Space Path Loss*. To all appearances this title seems to be a perfect contradiction, describing a situation that can be valorised either positively (free-space!) or negatively (path loss).

Not mere poetry (which is to say, not only poetic), this is actually a specific term that describes a telecommunicational equation, which, to quote the artist’s deft summary: ‘refers to a kind of thinning or dispersal of a signal when travelling in “free space” (such as air).’<sup>6</sup> Thus the title speaks as much to a

specific side-effect of telecommunication as it does to a loss that is liable to attend communication in general perhaps, not essential to its make up, but part of its process. Confounding presuppositions about direct contact or speech, as if it were somehow more efficacious or limpid when unimpeded by obstacles, but merely supposedly lubricated by or perfectly mediated by air, FSPL is the direct consequence of a signal becoming eroded by air itself.

It might seem ironic then that the eponymous work *Free-Space Path Loss* (2014) is fashioned out of one of the better materials for conduction, copper. The work consists of a copper frame, with saturated colorations created by applied heat as well as oxidised fingerprints. Its apparent irony rapidly dissipates into the traces, and therefore the infinitesimal loss of those things that have come into contact with it: heat and the human body.<sup>7</sup> While the human body conducts the work to its place, heat passes through it but not without at once permanently shedding a measure of itself onto and modifying the thing through which it passed.

By the same token, these traces arguably distill the notion of indexicality to its essence – even in so far as they are partially registered through the fingertip’s imprint. Testifying to the classical catch phrase of indexicality, which is ‘this happened’ or ‘someone was here’, these indexical marks contain or figure nothing more than their own index. In other words, they pointedly point to a presence as much to an absence. And yet for all that, the copper frame is in fact empty, framing nothing, and as such it remains open: framing a free space, as it were.

This preoccupation with free space crops up throughout Canell’s practice on numerous occasions, but never without doubting the principle or supposition that anything can ever be unencumbered by matter, or perhaps better yet by media (as in medium). If there is any one constant or fundamental article of faith (an article of faith that is also a principle of scepticism) that drives her work, it is the belief that the tangible world is encompassed by manifold intangible phenomena whose intangibility is only a matter of register, mode of perception or time. It

is perhaps not surprising then that the density and materiality of a supposedly ethereal substance also known to erode radio signals – air – is something of a recurring volume in Canell's oeuvre.

It figures, in congealed form<sup>8</sup>, in the work *Interiors (Condensed)* (2013). Comprised of a carpet with a drinking glass partially filled with fragments of congealed air at its centre, this work is laden with paradoxes of interiority and (in)accessibility. Interiors within interiors: the carpet itself, of course, refers to the domestic interior, meanwhile at the exact centre (interior) of the carpet is the glass, and then inside it is that which is generally supposed to be exterior to it as well. In a gesture that at once moves inward and outward, *Interiors (Condensed)* formally renders air inaccessible by both hardening and localising it in such way that what is not normally visible becomes visible only at a distance. This procedure of graduating interiors immediately refers, in a kind of counter-movement, to everything that is outside of it.

It does so in such a way that it all but reverses the procedure, so to speak, of the graduating interiors, ramifying outward. For not only does it refer to the architecture that contains it – it is inside the building, in *its* interior – but also refers to the air outside of the glass, which contains not only the body viewing it, but the building as well. In other words, both viewer and the building are technically inside what is inside the glass, if not, by a somersault of association, inside the glass itself. (This work only becomes stranger when there is more than one body in the space and the glass then contains, by dint of the same association, an interconnected plurality of people.)

That this work, incidentally, is about the architecture and the body as much as it is about air is belied by its very composition, which refers back to both through their very absence. (The carpet goes inside, while it is walked on and a glass is held in the hand.) Although not so much linked to allegory or metaphor, this piece also contains an instance of Canell's cherished irreducibility, and this is also attended by paradox<sup>9</sup>: that which is in

the glass (air) cannot be reduced to what is in the glass – it always refers to what is outside of it. And yet it is nevertheless exactly what it is: fragments of congealed air in a glass.

The motif of the interior is of course also integral to Canell's recent, on-going body of work with truncated subterranean electricity and communication cables (although cables have had a long history in her practice). Typically used, her cables, which come in a variety of diameters, are sometimes cast inside solid blocks of acrylic, at other times left in their raw state with cross-section or innards exposed. Their interiority is seconded by the subterranean interiority, the inside of the earth for which they are destined and where they formerly operated. Often hidden, they are not meant to be seen. Rather, our crude awareness of them generally extends no further than flicking on a switch, yet not only do they lurk beneath the ground upon which we walk, they also course through the walls that surround us. Their invisibility is compounded by a certain unthinkability in a digital, so-called wireless paradigm, as if they were improbable anachronisms. But their actuality is real: they subcutaneously populate our cities like skeins of artificial nerves, permitting one part of the body of a city to communicate with another.

All that said, Canell's interest in these objects does not seek to illustrate what we take for granted; it is rather manifold. For instance, I know that one point of interest for her is the extent to which these are conductors, carriers or, even better, willing hosts of information.<sup>10</sup> Far from ends in themselves, they connect, distribute, and compress, shorten and erase geography and distance as well as ramify – even if, segmented as such in her sculptures, they are severed from their function, removed from the chain and sequence of interconnection, abruptly ending. Each cable is a symbolic relic of the invisible distance we only ever travel immaterially, and if I say 'symbolic', it is in so far as it is but a part of a measurable but virtually unimaginable distance by which we are both separated and connected.

One thing I find particularly fascinating about this body of work is how she manages to

suffuse or tease out an organic quality from the most artificial and man-made of objects. But then again, if Canell has a magic touch, then this is it: virtually everything she works with, from machines to woods to metals, so on and so forth, seems to issue to a certain degree from the natural condition. This happens, on the one hand, because the materials with which she works always have a history. They are marked, in one way or another, by their former existence and use in the world, and as such they are incorporated into it – and I mean that etymologically: brought into its body – all but assuming telluric properties. On the other hand, this alchemical rigour occurs because her practice is not unmarked by current anthropological and philosophical debates and ultimately the rejection of Cartesian binaries such as culture/nature or mind/body.<sup>11</sup> In other words, that binary is not even necessarily there in the first place, but now it has been removed like a glove.

Carrying on in this same vein, as it were, another thing that cannot be ignored, and which I have already touched upon several times in this text, is the relationship of the works with the human body. Readable as nerve endings or truncated appendages, they wield a visceral impact, as if they themselves were viscera of some sort, exposing their internal micro viscera (the teeming fibrous network inside the cable). Generally speaking, how often the work indirectly refers to the body, how often the work is there by not being there at all, or how often the work requires it, even on a phenomenological level – all this is marked. Never mind the extent to which the body is metonymically atomised or pulverised into a constellation, so to speak, in the work *Blue (Diffused)* (2014), a piece consisting of a shredded blue sock, which also happens to be stray, flattened between two pieces of museum glass.

Consider, more significantly, *Passage (Saturated)* (2012), a collaboration with Robin Watkins. Located on a threshold, this sculptural installation is comprised of an antechamber (or in this case Lunds konsthall's characteristic entrance) equipped with a vent, which feeds oxygen-enriched

air into it. The oxygen level within this space has been raised by 5%. Now, whether or not this can be distinctly felt or perceived is one thing, but whatever the case may be, it has a way of underlining the presence of the body, heightening, if only through suspicion, an awareness of the experiencing body – of the body that, incidentally, interiorises the work, and hence the space containing the work itself.

To circle back to the beginning of this text and finally conclude, this continual, if surreptitious reference to the body and, now that I think about, the container, elaborates the paradoxes and contradictions touched upon at the outset of this text. Not only does the body contain and root the empirical experience of the world in the world (the empirical is inseparable from the experiencing body), it also holds and transports the mind to the imagination that extends from that same world. In this sense, the body could be considered a receptacle, that which stores, but also that which receives back (*re-ceptare*, as the word's Latin origin implies).

The works I have described – the frame, the drinking glass, the passage, the sock and cables – as well as other new works in the exhibition are all receptacles, objects that have held and hold anew, objects that receive back – sculptures that sculpt, poured into they pour back, that add and subtract, send and return. This conflation of absence and presence is integral to the logic of irreducibility that I mentioned earlier. Nina Canell augments the increasingly efficient usage of free space in between objects and bodies, the apparent emptiness that is her abundant emptiness. She holds the there to be not there and the here to be not here: not in order to deflate and diminish that space, but rather to enrich and multiply it.

**Chris Sharp**

# Notes

1. Notoriously difficult to define, the *inframince*, Duchamp claimed, could only be illustrated through examples. To wit: the warmth of a seat (that has just been left) is *inframince*; velvet trousers – their whistling sound (in walking) by brushing of two legs – is an *inframince* separation signalled by sound.
2. I'm thinking in particular of the likes of Robert Smithson, Gordon Matta-Clark, Juan Downey and Victor Grippo.
3. Take, for instance, Kafka, Beckett and even Clarice Lispector, all of whom are perfect examples of this interpretive dalliance with allegory and the metaphysical, from Kafka's castle (the guiding hereafter) to Beckett's Godot (God) to Lispector, when she famously writes: 'You see, vision consisted of surprising the symbol of the thing in the thing itself.'
4. I'm not the first to use this simile when attempting to describe what Canell does. See Fredrik Liew's characterisation in the press release for the exhibition 'Mid-Sentence' at Moderna Museet in Stockholm.
5. As a matter of fact, I was surprised to the point of bewildered by the accuracy and thoroughness of the material descriptions that accompanied the publication of the exhibition 'Mid-Sentence' at Moderna Museet, titled *Some Notes on Cables*. Although some were used by Canell for sculptures, each representation is a found technical drawing of a cable that exists. The caption includes an exhaustive

description of the material layers of the cable as well as its exact diameter. Indeed, I confess to feeling a certain queasiness before such punctiliousness, as if it were somehow grotesque. That said, I'm not sure if my queasiness issues from the fact that these exposed innards are evocative of human interiors – one thinks, inevitably, of the post-minimalism of Paul Thek – or from the clinical, nay preternatural, precision with which the cables' tissues are engineered. Although I'm aware that a combination of the two should not be ruled out.

6. From an email sent by the artist in October 2014.
7. Strictly speaking, it would be more correct to refer to the fingerprint the body leaves behind not as an infinitesimal loss of that body, but rather as an infinitesimal, if spectral multiplication of that body.
8. That is, 93% air and 7% silica dioxide.
9. A paradox, it just happens, that could also be read as a metaphor of Canell's relationship to irreducibility: a metaphor of metaphor.
10. From an email sent by the artist in January 2014.
11. See, for example, Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991) or the work of the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiro de Castro.

